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Art Associations And Pageants

by REGINALD POLAND

“The worldly hope men set their hearts upon
Turns ashes
“Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend
Before we too into the dust descend.”

Art for life's sake not for art's sake. If it has reason to exist in this world where all must struggle to live, it is to make us happier. If the beautiful makes us sad, it is because it is being misused. We go to the theatre to forget the dull drab “work-a-day world,” to get away from ourselves. Why not make this not only possible for the toiler but go a step farther and assure him of real happiness. Place within his vision beauty, objectivified happiness.

The greatest art is that which helps the greatest number. At least this is one of the essentials in Tolstoi's theory of aesthetics, which is followed by critics who have studied the many theories from the time of the Chinese to the present date. Unfortunately, all do not have time to study or even read histories, philosophies, essays, or accounts, concerning the artistic. Why not rather reach this large public through the theatricals for which we all seem to spare at least a few moments of our days? Why ignore actual conditions?

The day is passing when the stage presents a study cluttered with hundreds of books, papers, and debris exactly realistic to the last detail. Instead the scene pictures that which will suggest rather than photograph, that which will express the essence rather than the material shell, transporting us from the material. Thus art can make more attractive what we already enjoy.

The day of the “Little Theatre” is also passing. The prophecy long made is quite clear to Belasco, now vindicating his own presentations to those who advocate intimacy between actors and audience. They argue that

the audience should feel themselves a part of the presentation. Such would be an abnegation of the theatre. We go to see and enjoy others, not to struggle in the complications of the play ourselves. Therefore we shall not dwell on the "Little Theatre" because of its digression from an art perfect in itself to "community festival" wherein outside help is required.

Pageantry as it is being developed today has great possibilities. There are two noticeable manifestations of this form of presentation in Colorado. Of one type we shall speak but briefly. In it the community spirit is dominant. A large group work together to produce that in which the audience itself must have a share. Necessarily, something must be sacrificed to make this the prevalent spirit. It usually attempts to moralize, to teach a lesson of loyalty to our fellow men and often in a bigger way to our country. Art is above this. If we truly appreciate the significance of art we come naturally to value the "fitness of things," the meaning of the very word *art*. I hear someone say, "But the historical or biblical pageant is so educational." Well and good; so far, it is beneficial to humanity. But after all if we must be didactic let us become real teachers, instruct in a much clearer and more accurate manner by means of the text-book and documents.

The truly great pageant incidentally in presenting a panoramic picture of life educates, and in manifesting its joys and sorrows teaches a lesson. But when essentially artistic it does this and more.

A live art association can do much to reach its members and friends in the way most attractive to them. Why is it necessary always to see the monuments of art in musty museums, the fashionable display windows of dealers, or the collections of avaricious, proud, or *nouveau riche* owners?

In Colorado during the past year much has been done to make the pageant something more than a stupendous spectacle in which quantity rather than quality is all important. To be sure large numbers of participants were at times engaged. In Pueblo "The New Era of World Comradeship" with a cast of over a

thousand and a half was produced for the delectation of fully 7000 spectators. But there was something besides the mob spirit. An indication of the desire to make it an artistic triumph is the fact that an artist was commissioned to paint an appropriate back drop curtain costing \$2,000. Thus we have a point corroborating our previous statement that the great pageant will incidentally create a spirit of loyalty and instruct. The title indicates this. It is sufficient therefore to add that the action warranted this title. The woman who had charge of this particular production came to the Denver Art Association to study our methods in similar cases. In return our association gathered together those who would be peculiarly interested to hear her own story.

Similarly the president of Salida's organization, which presents artistic musicals, dramas, and operas came to study our collection of stage-models—settings and costume designs brought to Denver for a special purpose of which we shall speak. Although Salida's club originally confined activities within its own walls, it finally responded to appeals to entertain the general public. The members of that club were not *dilettanti* but students in their effort to attain the beautiful. For four years they had been systematically discussing the history and art of the stage from the time of classic Greece. They even designed scenery and costumes to illustrate the different types of productions. Thus Denver was able to help them in the program similarly scheduled for the coming year.

We mentioned the art of the stage placed on view in our gallery. It was the Bourgeois collection¹ brought from New York in connection with the "Omar Khayyam" pageant held in Denver in July of 1919. (See American Magazine of Art, October 1919.) In a word, these models in form, colors, and lights illustrated the modern theory of Kenneth McGowan and Robert E. Jones that in theatrical performances there must be synthesis of design, color, light, and action, to produce the main spirit of the play. At the time a comprehensive

¹Collection sent out by The Bourgeois Galleries, New York City.

and representative series of Indian, Persian, Turkish, American, and Egyptian illuminated manuscripts were brought here to furnish more concretely patterns and color schemes for the scenes and costumes of the Persian pageant.¹

As the blue light brightened the smoking incense held by Omar's shadow-shapes, so in the model of Johnson's "Poetic Play" the blue and green lights issuing from doors at either side of the stage expressed the spirit of the play. Blue purple was the background into which we gazed to infinity. In like manner a cycloramic pergola draped with a vaporous fabric formed the curtain, in deep, luminous blue against which the alluring life of luxurious Persia passed before our eyes. The scenery was in two dimensions apparently. Armfield's Byzantine throne scene, shown in our gallery, reflects a similar feeling. The *motif* of the purple tree against a field of gold was taken directly from a seventeenth century Eastern miniature of the Riefstahl collection exhibited. Omar reciting his quatrains from the flat roof, flowers here and there adding brightness to the greensward, fingers and toes fashionably tipped with carmine, these were little niceties which helped to make the picture much more truthful and fascinating. Also Spring, the most graceful figure, who introduced and closed the pageant, had apparently stepped from her frame of some precious Indian manuscript to live again for our enjoyment.

The costuming, scenery, lighting, and grouping of characters were all arranged by the Denver Art Association membership. By them was planned the division of the Rubaiyat into six parts, each of which was first sung or expressed in orchestral music to be repeated in pantomime. This repetition with the double appeal to ear and eye was itself artistic. Over five hundred participants playing to an audience that filled the moonlit garden of roses left in the remembrance of all a most fascinating picture.

¹Collection sent out by Dr. R. M. Riefstahl of New York City.



DENVER, "OMAR KHAYYAM" PAGEANT: DENVER, "OMAR KHAYYAM" PAGEANT:
ONE BEARING A FLASK OF WINE. THOU.



DENVER, "OMAR KHAYYAM" PAGEANT: SHADOW SHAPE AND EASTERN
CAPTIVE.

PLATE VI



DENVER, "EVERGREEN TREE" PAGEANT: DENVER, "EVERGREEN TREE" PAGEANT:
SONG. RUTH.



DENVER, "EVERGREEN TREE" PAGEANT: GASPAR, MELCHIOR, AND BAL-
THAZAR.

On Armistice Day in the huge City Auditorium a *revue* of the wars was enacted. The focal point centered in a pyramid whose foundations were the impersonated spirits prompting our great wars, while its crowning figure was Liberty. Here again color and light were used to enhance the significance and appeal of the tableaux.

But the greatest triumph came at Christmas. Percy MacKaye's "Evergreen Tree" was given by the Denver Art Association and the Municipal Chorus. Again the lighting, more perfect than in the Omar Khayyam, was in the hands of the most competent person.¹ The costuming was designed throughout by a trained artist² who remodeled the original sketches of Robert E. Jones to suit better our needs. A cast of several hundred, two huge stages seen from three directions with a connecting runway, an auditorium with an audience of 10,000 in which the speaking voice was not possible, these were a few of the problems the art association had to meet. Two choruses, one for the Herod and one for the Holy Family groups, together with the light, action, and intoned spoken parts, did much to keep the interest first on one stage and then the other.

Thus too the words were better heard and interest centered in different parts of the auditorium. That 10,000 sat through the long performance quietly, to sing as a unit when the proper time came, testifies to the success of this. This pageant was most successful in synthesizing costume, setting, light, and action to express one idea and mood. The gallery of the art association was the headquarters for this production. Here both plans and work were carried out. Incidentally, little more than half the city appropriation given for the expenses was used. This proves that the artistic is often cheaper.

¹Miss May Wilfley lighted the "Omar Khayyam," "Evergreen Tree," and "St. John's Mystery Play," as well as two series of plays given by the Denver Players.

²Mr. Robert E. Garrison, sculptor, designed entirely and made many of these costumes as well as those of other later performances.

At this same time "The Christmas Pageant of the Nativity" was given in Colorado Springs on a theatre stage in a less elaborate manner. It had been seen there before, proving so successful that it was repeated. Staged by the art lovers there, the parts which were most beautiful were consequently, in great measure, more impressive. For example the carefully lighted procession with the Holy Grail, the flame-red chalice, the emblems of Our Lord's suffering, and the seven-branched candlestick made the real climax. Similarly the Botticelli Angels, in purest white, each with a lighted taper, formed a perfect picture against the cool blue light.

The beauty of a pageant is its excuse for existing. Cities as far distant as Philadelphia have come to Denver to learn more about this field of our art association work. A representative of the School of Industrial Art, associated with the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, went to Boston and New York especially to study art in connection with one of their pageants last fall. To this end another instructor of the school came to our art gallery. His school already has over 500 Byzantine and Persian costumes for performances.

Even the community service has attempted to be artistic. The Denver Art Association arranged its Valentine Dance, a community party, given in the Auditorium. It planned the properties, costumes, and dance for the "Special Feature." Colleges in Colorado, as well as schools, and boys' and girls' clubs have leaned noticeably toward the pageant to depict their stories. The sudden popularity of this form of presentation itself has proved that art must come in for its share or the effect is soon tiresome and weak. "The ignominy of mediocrity" surely is true of poorly staged pageants! Last year, however, the University of Colorado held a May *fête*, a *revue* of fairy stories, on the grassy campus in the fresh green of spring. Only once in two years is this *fête* given. Graceful dances, colors as carefully harmonized and varied as the rainbow itself, a Gothic throne against a luminous orange background, all

seemed to fit into the natural setting of lawn stretching out before a screen of hedge with stately trees above. The years of careful research and designing by the art department of this college are justified from the joy given to all who saw that *fête*.